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OR,

The Young MONTE CRISTO

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TEXAS," "SIMPLE SIM," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

DEATH ON A MOUNTAIN TRAIL.

AZTEC AL halted, with a sudden paling of the cheeks. A wild clatter of hoofs racing down the narrow trail that here overhung a deep and rocky canyon, presaged peril, perhaps death.

He had been pushing a bicycle up the steep mountain slope. To the seat of the

"GOOD-BY!" SHOUTED GABE. "THE PIT DOWN THERE IS A-ROarin' FOR YOU TO COME ON!"

bicycle a small leather mail pouch was attached, containing the mail he had been sent by his father to get from the stage station of Pilcomayo, in the distant valley.

He stopped, crowding himself and the bicycle against the stony wall, and gave utterance to a cry as a saddled and riderless horse came into view, racing with frantic fury along the dizzy ledge.

It was plain the horse had been frightened and had thrown its rider, and that it was now running away. The steepness of the descent failed to deter it, and it came on at a racing speed over a trail no wider than its body.

Little wonder that the youth caught his breath and felt his brain reel under the influence of quick terror. He could not hope that he would escape being knocked from the trail and killed.

Nor could he hope to leap to the bicycle seat and beat the horse to the bottom of the slope. The way was tortuous and boulder-strewn, the ledge ticklishly narrow in places, and the danger of shooting sheer out into space at some angle, or of toppling from the pass, was too great.

Yet, seemingly, that was all he could do; and he was on the point of trying it when a happier thought came.

To the seat of the bicycle, at the side of the mail pouch, a long-barreled revolver swung in a case.

This he plucked out, cocked and aimed, with the celerity of much practice.

The horse was now not a hundred yards away. Its head was in the air, its eyes shining wildly. A cloud of steam came from its nostrils. The stirrups and saddle-leathers bounced and danced with a loud clatter.

It seemed a miracle that it did not slip at the short turns and fall headlong to destruction, but long familiarity with narrow mountain trails had given security to its footing.

Braced like a rock by the side of his bicycle, with the big revolver uplifted and the horse tearing madly toward him, the youth presented as heroic a figure as sculptor ever chiseled or painter ever put on canvas.

His smooth face, almost as dark as a Mexican's, spoke of Indian blood, and explained the name of Aztec Al, by which he was best known. The complexion accorded well with the clothing he wore—with the bright Mexican jacket and the brilliant scarf that girt his waist. The poise of head and body was that of firm resolution—of cool, yet desperate, determination.

Nearer came the horse, until but twenty yards separated them. Then the revolver cracked, and the horse tumbled heavily from the ledge, with a bullet in its brain, and dropped, with a suggestive thud, on the rocks below.

"If I had missed him," the youth panted, cautiously peering over. "We'd both have been in the canyon, I'm thinking."

He was so weak he could not push the bicycle, but his strength soon came back, and he went on up the trail, filled with curiosity and anxiety. Was the man, hurled from the horse, in the bottom of the canyon, too?

A quarter of a mile above, at a point where the trail widened, he found the rider lying face downward on the rocks, apparently dead.

Aztec Al went up to him and turned him over. The man was a Mexican, and was breathing, though unconscious. He was lying dangerously near the rim of the ledge, from which a slight movement might have pitched him; and Al drew him back to a safer position.

Searching in his pockets in the hope of finding a flask of liquor, a piece of paper dropped out. As it dropped, it fell open,

and revealed the name of Israel Isett, the boy's father.

Alfred Isett—Aztec Al—stopped in his search for the liquor flask and bent over the paper. Its contents so startled him that he almost forgot the injured Mexican.

The writing was in Spanish, a language as familiar to him as English, and this is what he read:

"Carretas is in arms. Government troops are marching against it and us. But we will conquer. Be of good courage. The cowardly American miner, Israel Isett, has been thrown into the Carretas jail by the Alcalde. He is to be shot. We need your help, and direction. Come quickly. May the peace of God be with you."

"FROM MAXIMO PARAN TO JUAN ROMERO."

Al's heartbeats almost stilled. He had been journeying to his father's mine in the neighborhood of Carretas, the walled and mud-built Mexican town on the irrigated plateau above. There had been some talk of trouble when he went away, but he had not dreamed it would come to this.

His father was trying to work the Carretas mine under many difficulties, not the least of which was caused by incompetent laborers. Perhaps he had been harsh to the peons employed. At any rate, he had gained the ill-will of many Indians and Mexicans.

Now, this hatred, which had but wanted an opportunity to express itself, had hurled Israel Isett into the Carretas jail, and threatened his life.

What mattered it that but a few miles to the northward was the border-line of New Mexico and the United States? The strong hand of Uncle Sam was not likely to make itself felt here. The American government seemed as far away as if it had been located in the moon.

"Juan Romero!" Al muttered, tucking away the paper and looking at the man's face.

The name was that of a Mexican bandit who had made his power felt throughout all that region. It had been more than once hinted that the alcalde was, himself, no more than Romero's servant and slave; and, indeed, the entire district was little better than a robber stronghold.

"Instead of helping him, I ought to pitch him into the canyon."

Nevertheless, Al drew out the flask of mescal on which his hand had fallen, and poured some of its contents down the throat of the unconscious rascal.

It required a great deal of it to warm the blood in Romero's veins, but he recovered consciousness at last, and, sitting up, stared about him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I have just helped you out of a scrape; and I'll tell you more, after you've told me what you know about this business up in Carretas! You're Juan Romero?"

He took out the paper and displayed the writing.

"What's Israel Isett in jail for?"

The man eyed him keenly.

"You're his son, I see. I thought your face looked familiar. He's in jail because he's a dog of an American that ought to die—and he will die!"

"Rather strong talk, that. You don't want to tempt me to throw you into the canyon!"

The man saw his mistake and changed his air.

"You angered me, senor, by taking that paper out of my pocket! I beg your pardon. My head is not right yet. If you will favor me by looking up my horse, I will proceed on my journey, and not trouble you further."

"Your horse is dead, at the bottom of the canyon. He was about to knock me

from the trail. It was his life or mine, and I had to shoot him."

The bandit suppressed his rage with difficulty.

"My saddle and bridle, then! I would not lose them!"

Al knew how the average Mexican horseman values these articles; and, after making Romero as comfortable as possible, he picked his way to the bottom of the canyon, removed the saddle and bridle from the dead horse, and climbed back with them.

They were miracles of the saddler's art, inlaid with silver and gold, and worth much more than any horse to be obtainable on the plateau.

When he came again in sight of Romero, Aztec Al saw that he had fallen backward on the rocks and lay as if dead.

"The scamp's going to make a die of it yet! He must have been hurt internally."

He cast down the saddle and bridle and ran up to Romero. Bending over him he attempted to lift him, at the same time calling aloud and giving him a shake.

But Romero was not dead—not even unconscious. The faint was a feint, as was made apparent to Aztec Al when he felt the Mexican's strong arms about his body and choking fingers against his throat.

A desperate struggle instantly ensued. Al was almost as large and strong as a grown man, but he had been taken at a terrible disadvantage. However, he succeeded in tearing loose the choking fingers, and together the two rolled over and over, in momentary danger of toppling from the ledge.

He got Romero about the waist and lifted him bodily, but stumbled against the rocky wall and lost this momentary advantage. Then Romero's iron-like fingers again closed on his throat.

Struggle as he would, Al could not shake off the bull-dog grip. It tightened and tightened, until the blood swam in a hot mist in his eyes, until his lungs swelled almost to bursting, and his brain reeled. Then came a sense of falling from a great height, and the blackness of darkness.

When Al regained his senses, he was tied up snug and fast, and Juan Romero was sitting before him on the ledge, grinning like a yellow-faced fiend.

CHAPTER II.

BICYCLE AGAINST BRONCHOS.

The yellow lips came together, the teeth snapping like those of a wolf, and the noose of the lariat was tossed over Aztec Al's head and about his neck.

"I don't intend you shall get away, you see. We've got your father all right, and now I've got you. I told you that Israel Isett is in jail because he's a dog of an American, and you're going into the same jail for the same reason."

Al quailed, in spite of the courage he sought to assume. He began to see that Romero was utterly devoid of gratitude and as vindictive and bloodthirsty as a tiger. That he had assisted Romero and perhaps saved his life, would not count for anything.

"We'll go on, now, down the trail, as soon as you are able to walk!"

Romero jerked Al to his feet by means of the lariat, for the boy was perfectly helpless, with his hands bound. Then he whipped out a knife and severed the rawhide thong about Al's ankles.

Having done this, he bound the heavy saddle to Al's back, and drove him down the trail, lashing him with the rope's end and jerking him cruelly by the noose.

In this manner they went on, Romero carefully wheeling the bicycle.

He found it a most unmanageable machine, and more than an hour elapsed before they reached the valley.

Here Romero's face lit up with pleasure. A band of horsemen whom he recognized as followers was approaching, and quickly drew near.

Romero fired off a pistol to attract their attention and hasten their movements.

"What news, my men?" he questioned, as they drew about him, saluting.

"We go to Carretas, at the call of the alcalde. Like enough we will be needed."

"Very true. And your coming is welcome. With my prisoner, I will go with you. He is the son of the American dog, Israel Isett."

The black looks bent on Al were anything but reassuring.

He was glad to know, however, that he was to be taken to Carretas, even though a prisoner. Some turn of fortune's wheel might give him his liberty, and aid him in the rescue of his father.

He was as eager to be off as any there. His heart leaped with hope, when he found that the bonds were to be taken from him and that he was to be permitted to ride his bicycle.

Yet the hope seemed wild and foolish. About him and behind him rode armed men, whose pistols were ready and whose bronchos were fleet. It seemed that a dash for liberty would be but a dash to death.

Nevertheless, Al kept his eyes about him, as he set off with the cavalcade up the valley, that wound in easy gradients toward the town, and his hope grew when the men began to talk loudly and became engrossed with a discussion of the doings of the revolutionists.

The opportunity which he had sought came at the crossing of a high divide.

Here a trail, narrow and dizzy as the one down which the horse had fled, dropped toward the eastward, winding in acute angles.

"Look there!" he cried, lifting a hand and pointing in a direction opposite to that he intended to take. "What does that mean? Those men over there?"

He had seen no men at the point indicated, but every head turned in that direction.

Then, with a quick spurt, he flew down the steep trail, and had turned the first angle before they were aware of his deception.

Loud cries of excitement arose. For a minute he was out of sight; then the outward curve of the trail brought him again into view, and they began to fire at him with their muskets.

Spat! spat! spat!

Around and above him the musket balls struck, flattening against the granite and hurling rocky splinters through the air.

He felt it to be a race for life, and worked the pedals with an unwonted strength and vehemence, arching his back like a hoop and throwing all the power of his muscles into the work. Never had he seemed to come so near to flying.

He appeared to skim like a swallow along the rocky wall, and was almost as difficult an object to hit. Before a half dozen shots could be fired he had turned the next angle and was safe for another minute or two.

"After him!" bellowed Romero. "Don't let him get away! Shoot him down!"

Three or four, who rode bronchos that were particularly sure-footed and fast, spurred down the narrow trail.

Al had come in sight once more, and the muskets were again bellowing, but he was more than a hundred yards further away, and the chance of hitting him was that much lessened.

The excitement made him temporarily oblivious to the danger of this reckless racing. On one side rose the mountain, like the wall of a house; on the other side was a canyon two hundred feet deep.

A single miscalculation, or the deviation of a foot, was likely to hurl him to death.

"Whiz-z-z! Buz-z-z! Bur-r-r-r!" sounded the whirring wheel.

It had gained such speed that his feet were taken from the pedals and he only sought to guide it and hold it firm and true on the narrow track.

Mind and eye, nerve and muscle, were strained to the utmost. He seemed to be half falling through space. The granite wall and the rocky shoulders slipped by with blurred indistinctness. Dimly, he heard the shouts of the Mexicans and the crash of the guns. It was a time in which fascinating terror and high resolve were combined.

Then he realized that he had left his enemies far behind, and sought to decrease his speed. He pressed on the brake, carefully at first, then harder, and thrilled with horror as it snapped!

The action caused the wheel to wobble so that it almost pitched from the ledge. With blind instinct he righted it and maintained his seat.

He tried to get his feet on the pedals, that were spinning around with inconceivable rapidity, but failed.

He was on a runaway steed, with bridle broken, and control lost!

But for the fact that he knew it would be death, he would have flung himself from the bicycle.

He had never dreamed of such speed. The bicycle leaped like a living creature. There were stretches of yards when it seemed not to touch the ground at all.

Then, could he believe it? He was at the bottom of the mountain trail, and the river making a bend at that point, crossed his line of flight.

The angle was too acute to be turned at that high rate, and the bicycle, like a horse that had stampeded and lost its head, shot straight out from the trail at the turn!

For an instant it seemed poised in mid-air, an instant of inexpressible fear! Then it shot downward with awful swiftness.

It struck the water near the further shore and went out of sight, carrying Aztec Al with it.

CHAPTER III. THE JUGGLER TRAMP.

Concealed in a clump of chapparal on the river bank, was a nondescript figure, which had scuttled out of sight as if for refuge when the loud "burr-r-r" of the wheel on the trail had been heard.

"Pipe my eye, but that's queer!" he muttered, crouching and fairly shivering as the wheel and rider came into view and bounded into space.

Then Aztec Al, meshed in the wheel and half drowned, struggled for his life in the water, and the nondescript came out of his place of concealment and ran to the river's brink.

"Ah, there!" he cried, reaching out a hand and seizing the youth by the hair as he was swept by on the current, and dragging him and the wheel by main force out on the land.

Al had swallowed enough river water to last him a great while, and, in addition, had hit his head so hard against a rock that he was quite unconscious.

"Boy and bicycle all busted up!"

The man was right. The wheels were twisted, and the spokes bent and broken.

He handled the bicycle as gingerly as he did the boy, leaned it against a rock, after a careful examination, and then turned his attention to its rider.

The face that bent over Al was broad and puffy, and showed marks of dissipation. It had been clean-shaven, but now supported a week's growth of stubby gray beard. The clothing was torn, the hat battered and disreputable, the shoes full of

holes. In fact, the man's entire appearance was trampish.

"Queer business this! Wonder what them shots meant?"

He lifted himself and stared up the trail, though he could see only a few hundred yards. His ears caught the rattle of hoofs.

"I guess this chap's been a-runnin' away from somebody, and I don't doubt it's my Christian duty to see that he don't fall into their hands while he's in this fix!"

Al was no lightweight, but the tramp lifted him and bore him back into the shelter of the chapparal, and, returning immediately, wheeled and lifted the bicycle to the same point.

Luckily for his purposes, the water boiled and splashed over the rocks at the bend, and, when the pursuing horsemen reached the angle, and seeing nothing to arouse their suspicions, they rode on down the trail on the run.

More than an hour passed before Aztec Al came back to consciousness, and, feeling of his bandaged head, stared about.

In a sort of dream-like state he had heard a low "tink, tink," and had had the impression that he was again in the power of the Mexicans, and that they were riveting chains on him.

He heard the "tink, tink," sure enough, and, lifting himself on his elbow, he saw a man, who looked like a city bum, striving to ride the bicycle. It was broken, and the metallic sounds were made by one of the spokes, that struck against another, as the forward wheel revolved.

"Hello!" said the man. "Got them beautiful eyes open, have ye? Well, I was just beginning to think you was never goin' to open 'em, and that I'd fall heir to this bike. So I concluded I might as well commence practicin'! But that's the way fortune generally treats me!"

"I say, now! you come down that trail like a snow-slide. When I first see you, I says to myself, 'hyer comes a new-fangled flyin' machine!' An' you're feelin' better? Well, now, that's clever! You tried to find out which is the hardest, your head or a rock, and you got the worst of it!"

He had dismounted, and now brought the bicycle under cover and threw himself down at Al's side.

"Where are they?"

"Oh, them men that were after you? So fer's I know, they're still b'ilin' down the trail, an' they was a-bilin' purty fast when they passed hyer! They don't love you, I reckon."

Al sat up, in spite of a violent headache.

"You've helped me, and I feel that I can trust you. I'll risk it, anyway!"

"Well, now, that's kind. I'm willin' to admit that there air handsomer and honester men in the world. If I kin help you, though, without puttin' my head in a halter, I'm willin'! Them Mexicans weren't specially purty to look at!"

The youth surveyed him closely.

"I borreder these clo'es. I didn't like to wear my best in the mountains. If you want to know who I am, I'm a juggler showman in reduced circumstances, and I own to the historic name of Smith. Sometimes I'm called Barnum Smith, an' sometimes Bazoo Smith. You kin take your choice, an' 'welcome'!"

"I'm afraid those men will come back, and that more at the top of the trail may descend! For that reason I want to get away from here. And I want to go to Carretas, where my father has been thrown in jail by some of these scoundrels. If you will help me—"

"A bit of money in it, eh?"

Al shook his head.

"I might be lying if I'd say so. I know my father will pay you well, though, if his life is spared and he is able. He's the owner of the Carretas silver mine."

The tramp's eyes brightened.

The Tramp's Trump-Trick.

"That looks promisin' now. Owns a silver mine, does he? I'm yours till death do us part!"

He thrust his head out of the chapparal and listened long and carefully.

"You could walk, I s'pose, with a little help? I kin tell you that you're as heavy as lead. As for that bike—what are we goin' to do with it?"

Aztec Al drew it to him and carefully examined it. The sun and the sapless air had already removed every trace of water from it.

"Better hide it here and leave it. It's too broken for use."

The tramp readily assented to this.

He had been making his way toward Carretas, and a vision of the aid he might get from Al's father made him willing now to assist the youth. Though, to do him justice, it is only fair to say that he would, in all probability, have assisted the lad if there had been no hope of reward, for, as Al was to learn, there was a great deal of the milk of human kindness in the heart covered by that shabby coat.

Al was anxious to get away from the dangerous vicinity before the return of the horsemen, and when the bicycle had been carefully hidden, the tramp assisted him into another trail, which Al pointed out. Then, together, they continued on toward the town.

They camped on the mountain side that night, but going on the next day.

It was mid-afternoon before they drew near the mud walls of Carretas. Al had quite recovered from the immediate effects of his fall against the rock, though, of course, the cut was far from being healed.

A lively musketry fire was in progress, the soldiers outside of the walls shooting at those within, and being replied to in a spirited manner.

"This kind of music never did sound quite as sweet as a pianner to me. It's a sort of orchestra that I don't hanker to git close to!"

Nor could Al persuade the tramp to make any effort to get within the town's walls.

"I reckon I'm a deal safer out here than in there, sonny! I'll strike these here soldiers fer somethin' in the way of chuck, d'reckly! Mebbe I kin manage to steal enough from 'em to live on, if they don't give it to me! But in the town—why, if it's took, I calculate that every blamed rebel in it will be shot, without judge er jury. Thankee; I'm very well contented right where I be!"

But Al was resolved to penetrate the lines and get into Carretas, no matter what the risk, hoping to be able to save his father.

From their position, they could see the high, whitewashed tower of the prison where his father was certainly confined, and the sight of it inspired him to an endeavor.

"Good-by, then! I'm sorry to leave you. But I'll never forget how you've helped me. If the chance comes, you may be sure I'll be glad to pay it back."

"I'mbettin' that you'll git a bullet in you. But you've my gest wishes that you'll come out all right, and that I'll yit git a whack at that silver mine owned by your dad."

Al was pushing on, in a fever of impatience, and the juggler tramp waved a farewell, his right arm flapping up and down like that of a ragged scarecrow.

The attention of the besiegers was directed wholly toward the town, and Al was in their very midst, slipping from rock to rock, before they knew of his presence.

He was discovered, as he rose suddenly at the side of the startled commander.

"You want to get into that town, eh?" Al questioned, without the tremor of a muscle, as he looked into the muzzle of the pistol that the commander drew and presented. "If you do, I am here to say I can help you. Try that opposite gate!"

The officer looked at him doubtfully; then he put down the pistol and showered him with questions, while several of the men crowded about.

"I've got a plan!" assured Al, with unblushing boldness. "I'm going into that town! You want to go in there, so we can help each other! My father is in there in that jail, and I'm going to get him out!"

"If you'll let me, I'll take a body of men and attack that opposite gate, while you keep up a lively firing on this side to draw their attention. I've been through that gate hundreds of times, and know that it can be battered down just like nothing, if you've got men with grit enough to walk up to it. I'll agree to put myself at their head!"

He said it with the coolness of a veteran. There was nothing of bravado in his air, and his words carried conviction.

The commander requestioned him and elicited his whole story.

"I've heard of your father, and I judge you're speaking the truth. I guess I can afford to trust you!"

He turned to his men.

"I want twenty volunteers for this duty—twenty men who will follow this young fellow and batter in the eastern gate of Carretas. I will have two score more ready to support you and follow you!"

There was a minute's hesitation; then a score stepped to the front, showing that there were brave men in this detachment of the Mexican army.

The lay of the land was favorable for the maneuver, and Al conducted his volunteers by a circuitous route through the hills to approach the barred eastern gate.

All around Carretas was a high mud wall, easily breached by cannon, but proof against musketry. It had only two gates, the eastern and the western, and Al knew the eastern gate would be the easiest taken.

Carefully handling his men, he kept them out of sight, and arranged them for the charge in a little hollow, not more than two hundred yards from the brown mud wall.

Then he made them a speech, flourishing the revolver given him by the Mexican commander, as if it were a sword.

Eight men, with revolvers, were to lead the charge. The others were to bear a heavy beam of wood, to be used as a battering ram.

Cheers were not allowable, nor would they have been given by these non-cheering Mexicans; but the smiles on the yellow faces, and the glitter and snap of black eyes told their boy leader that he could rely on their fidelity.

"Forward!" was his low command. "Every man must do his duty, and we must take that gate. Your comrades are just behind you."

They had seen the flitting forms of the approaching support, and were thrilled with encouragement.

The moment was auspicious, and Al, without an instant's hesitation, led them out of the hollow, and, setting himself at their head, ran toward the gate.

CHAPTER IV. BEHIND PRISON WALLS.

The patter of feet aroused the guard in the watch tower at the side of the gate. He fired his musket to give the alarm, and then, to secure his own safety, leaped down inside the wall.

His shot was without effect, and, before others could mount to the tower, and to

the top of the wall, the storming party was at the gate, battering away with the beam of wood.

The furious blows hurled the gate from its hinges, and over the broken timbers scrambled the boy, with his men.

But they found resistance. Though the surprised defenders fell back before them, a musketry fire came from the streets and from the houses that cut down more than one of the assaulting party.

"This way!" cried Al. "Follow me! Follow me!"

He gave a victorious American cheer, swung his revolver and rushed in the direction of the prison.

His men followed bravely enough. The bullets flew faster, and to their ears came the cries of the men without who were running toward the breached gate.

Al thought only of his father, in that big, white prison, and pushed on, firing his pistol, and cheering loudly. He saw some of his men fall about him, and found himself opposed by a big Mexican, armed with a saber.

He fired at the gaudy figure, then leaped forward.

He saw his ball strike the Mexican in the shoulder, and expected to see him fall.

Instead, the Greaser shifted the saber to his left hand, and swinging it, with a fierce oath, struck fiercely at the daring youth.

It was not a direct cut, or it would have killed the boy then and there. The broad side of the blade caught him on the crown of the head, and beat him senseless into the dust of the street.

When he came to himself the fight was over, his men were dead or driven back, and he was lying in the big white prison he had tried to reach, feeling dreadfully used up, and more dead than alive.

Then he heard his name called, and roused himself, to stare into the face of his father.

Strangely enough, they were in the same cell, which was large enough for half a dozen ordinary cells.

"My boy! my boy! Why are you here?"

These were the words Al heard, and he knew he had been dragged into the cell and pitched down on the floor only a moment before.

The wound received by contact with the rock was again bleeding, but, fortunately, the blow of the saber had produced only a bruise. His head was so sore, though, he could hardly bear the weight of a finger on it, and it ached as if it would split.

He scrambled to his feet and rushed into his father's arms. He was so glad to see his father alive and well that, for the moment, he forgot they were both prisoners, in danger of early and violent death.

With the fewest possible words the boy explained how he came to be there, studying the while his father's face.

It was a weary, worn and bearded face, but a face that was energetic withal, and not unkindly.

Israel Isett had witnessed the charge on the gate, though, in the confusion, he had not recognized his son as the leader of the charging party.

"It was a foolish thing for you to do!" was his gentle reproof. "You can see yourself how foolish! It has done me no good, and has put you here in the power of these miscreants!"

He looked pityingly and compassionately at his son, but he did not communicate the fact, that, on the morrow, he, Israel Isett, expected to be shot to death.

"Eh, what is that?" and Isett peered from the barred window.

A portion of the country beyond and near the walls was visible, and out from

behind a large rock they saw a pursy figure crawl, writhing along like a horned toad.

"It's Bazoo Smith, the tramp," Al explained.

Bazoo Smith, who possibly expected safety by reason of his trampish and non-combative character, had, with a strange accession of courage, insinuated himself through the lines of the besiegers, even venturing to a point very near the walls.

He had been able to do this because of the assault on the gate, which had so drawn attention from the western side.

As they looked, a weazened little Mexican, belonging within the town, dropped down from the wall, and, running quickly and forward, confronted the itinerant.

The tramp shrank and cowered, as the Mexican's pistol flashed before his eyes. He seemed literally to hug the ground and to grow smaller and smaller, and there could be no doubt he was badly frightened.

Then, to the disgust of Israel Isett and the amazement of Al, he was seen to crawl to the Mexican's feet and endeavor to kiss the Mexican's hand, for which exhibition of craven fear he was promptly and energetically kicked in the stomach.

"Served him right!" was the almost involuntary ejaculation of Isett.

However, all this eating of humble pie availed the tramp nothing. The gate was suddenly flung open a foot or two, and others rushed out to the little Mexican's assistance, and the fellow was dragged ignominiously within the walls.

Five minutes later the watchers in the prison saw him being driven along the street in that direction.

Then he was lost to view, only to reappear with his captors before the prison.

When next seen, he was in the interior of the jail, and was being pushed toward the cell occupied by the Isetts.

"Senors," he was pleading, "I am your friend! I was trying to get in to help you! I am a juggler. If I can amuse you—get me a hall, anything—I'm at your service! Would you like to see an exhibition of magic?"

Turning, when he knew his appeal would not avail, he saw the barred door of the cell into which he was to be thrust, and the face of Aztec Al. His own face underwent an instant transformation.

"I was jist foolin' them chaps for a purpose!" he avowed, when the door clanged behind him, and the guard had gone. "I done the whole thing—let 'em bring me here and all—so that I might be able to help you people!"

By an instinct he knew that this bearded man was Al's father, even before a word of introduction had been uttered.

He stretched out a hand, which Isett took, with some hesitation.

"I rescued your son there, as no doubt he's told you! And, now, I'm here to git you out of this scrape!"

Words of scorn were about to fall from Isett's lips, but they were stayed, as the tramp removed his battered hat, turned the leather band (which was like the heavy leather band of a cowboy hat), and from it began to draw a little spring-steel saw.

The hat-band was double, and the two parts were joined together in a way to make of it a thin pocket.

With the saw, there also came out a quantity of cord, of firm, fine texture.

"You look as if you don't believe that I come here to help you, but here's the proof! The proof of the puddin', gents, is in chewin' the bag! With this here little saw, and this string backed by some acid I've got, we three ought to be able to walk through any jail that was ever got up!"

CHAPTER V.

A DASH FOR LIBERTY.

Israel Isett placed a hand on the tramp's arm and nodded toward the adjoining cells.

"Better be a little quiet. Some other fellows in here may hear you. I'm afraid they've heard you already!"

The itinerant stared dumbly in the direction indicated.

"I reckon I'll never git old enough to learn good hoss sense!" he whispered, retreating to a corner and sitting flat down on the floor. "This is a little business in which three's company and more is a crowd!"

He passed over the saw and the cord for inspection, and, when Al and his father were examining the articles, he began to twist at one of the big buttons on his ragged coat, holding it all the while very carefully.

The top of the button came off, revealing a liquid with which the hollow button was filled. The button was, in truth, a sort of phial.

"That's a stuff that's got to be handled mighty ticklish. It's an acid that'll eat holes in a man's fingers afore he kin wink twice. I handle it precious careful, I tell you. Put a little on that string and rub the string over an iron bar, and it'll walk through the bar as if the string was a saw and the bar nothin' but wood. As fer the real wood, that litte saw will do the business fer it!"

He screwed the top of the button into place with a quick twist, and replaced the saw and string in his hat-band.

"I jist wanted to prove to you that I ain't altogether a fraud, whatever else you may think; and I'll say to ye that if we want to, bad enough, we kin walk out o' this jail, to-night!"

"But the guards?"

The tramp winked owlishly and fished a dollar from some place in his ragged clothing.

"Them Greasers searched me, but they didn't find this! I think I kin fix the guards!"

Muskets were again popping, and the trio hurried to the barred window.

Another assault had been undertaken, but, even as they looked, they saw it result in failure.

They went back to the corner and earnestly discussed the situation. All were undeniably anxious to get out of the prison, and it began to seem to the Isetts that the capture and imprisonment of Smith was a providential interposition in their behalf.

Israel Isett told of the sentence of death passed on him.

"We'll git out o' here to-night!" the wanderer promised. "We've jist got to."

The day passed, with constant alarms to the garrison, and the night came, promising nothing better.

A soldier brought them a half-cooked supper on a wooden tray, and, as he turned to go, Smith slipped a shining silver dollar into his hand and whispered to him, in bad Mexican:

"Bring us a bottle of aguardiente! We would drink your health with you, and the health of the prisoners in these other cells!"

The soldier looked sharply at the money, then moved away, with a sly wink.

"I was sure it would fetch him."

The tramp was unscrewing another button, which revealed, when the top had been removed, a small quantity of white powder.

"A little of that will make them slumber like the seven sleepers!" and he uttered a light laugh.

Removing a pinch of the white powder,

he held it cautiously between thumb and finger, and replaced the top of the button.

All was in readiness, and the darkness was increasing before the soldier came back.

The bottle he brought was not large, and it was evident he had kept part of the money.

Smith uncorked the bottle, smelt of the liquor, and contrived to slip into it the powder.

"How many are in the other cells?"

"Just two," replied the soldier, greedily smacking his lips. "Then there's the guard. Shall I not get another bottle, senor?"

"Ay, the guard must have some of this! It would not do to neglect him. Come, it is my treat. Take this to the other prisoners. And, look you! Tell them to touch it light, so that you and the guard may have an abundance. If I had another dollar I'd send for another bottle. But, alas!"

The soldier hastened obediently away.

When he came back a third of the aguardiente had disappeared, and the juggler knew that the soldier had taken a pull at the bottle in the darkness of the passage.

"Drink our healths, senor! We would be merry to-night, for to-morrow we may die! How goes the fighting?"

"Ah, bad enough! The troops have got us hemmed in like rats in a cage. However, here is to your health, senors, and to the health of Juan Romero!"

He tipped the bottle to his lips, held it on high, and allowed the aguardiente to slip with a gurgle down his capacious throat. The contents of the bottle were sadly lowered when the bottle was withdrawn from his lips.

"Ay, but these liquor sellers are rascals, senor! For a bright dollar like the one you gave me one should have gotten a gallon of the stuff! Ho, there!"

He shouted to the guard, who, knowing what was in store, came hurriedly, and drank as greedily.

When the occupants of the cell had each taken a pull, which they did by pretending to drink and pouring some of the stuff over their clothing, there was a small quantity left, which the soldier and the guard divided between them.

The soldier carried away the bottle, that no visible evidence might be left, and the guard returned to his post at the outer door.

Though their plan had worked to perfection, nearly an hour was permitted to pass before the little saw and the string with the acid were brought into play on the bars that fenced them in.

It was close and careful work, this cutting out of the cell, and another hour passed before it was accomplished.

Then, in shoeless feet, they crept along the mud floor and descended to the gate, where, as they expected, they found the guard sound asleep at his post.

The drugged liquor had done its work.

Al bent over the guard, took the musket out of his nerveless fingers, and the jail keys from his pocket.

Over the wall they could see the reflection of the lights of the town, and could hear the sound of voices in the streets. Ever and anon came the crash of a musket shot, as some guard fired from the wall at a skulking figure.

"It would have been better if we had waited until later," said Isett, as they turned toward the gate.

They had been afraid to risk that. The danger of discovery in the jail had seemed greater than that which now confronted them.

Hanging on the wall near the gate were some ropes, and Aztec Al appropriated one

of these and passed the musket to his father.

The gate was not hard to unlock, and in a few seconds they found themselves in the street.

The lights were not so bright as they had thought. In one of the streets, in the center of the town, a camp-fire was burning, casting a glow against the sky, but they knew they could readily avoid its light.

Groups of men were visible here and there, but none near the jail.

"This way," whispered Al, relocking the gate, and turning toward the right.

When he had gone a few feet, tossing the jail keys into a rubbish heap, he hurried on, leading by a circuitous route, toward the northeast corner of the mud wall which enclosed the town.

Their arrangements were complete. They had even agreed on a place of meeting should they become separated.

All was going well, more than half of the distance had been traversed, and their hopes were growing, when a dog leaped out of one of the adobe huts, and assailed them, with furious barkings.

They paused irresolutely. Voices were heard in the hut, and it seemed impossible to escape discovery.

Israel Isett lifted the musket as if to fire, but hesitatingly lowered it.

"Better make a run for it, I reckon," suggested the juggler, suiting the action to the word.

The fat tramp could run at a lively gait when put to it, and he now cut out at his best pace.

Al leaped after him, and Isett brought up the rear with the musket.

Their flight increased the rage of the dog. Some one rushed to the door of the mud hut, and, seeing them dashing down the narrow street, raised a cry of alarm.

Again and again he yelled, and, in response to his cries, the adobe huts along the way began to vomit their inhabitants.

Pell mell they tumbled out of the houses, men, women and children, and some soldiers being also attracted, a lively chase ensued, led by the barking dog.

As yet the pursuers did not know whom they were pursuing, but that took nothing from the fervor with which they entered into the chase.

The juggler was puffing like a porpoise, and the sweat was rolling from his fat body before he had gone a hundred yards.

As for Israel Isett, the cur was leaping at him, and snapping at his heels in a way to drive him mad.

"This will never do!" was his thought. "We can never get away while they are led by this dog!"

With this he wheeled, and, firing quickly, had the satisfaction of seeing the cur roll over with a loud yelp.

The musket shot served but to increase the speed and fury of the pursuers, and, a number of soldiers coming out of a side street, the hotly-pressed fugitives were pushed harder than ever.

Al, fleeter of foot than the tramp, again led.

Reaching the angle of the wall, he coiled the rope he had carried, and hurled it at the spikes with which the wall was surmounted.

Once, twice, three times he threw, before the noose of the rope caught and held fast.

Then he pulled on it to test it, and began to climb up, hand over hand, pressing his feet against the wall.

But the guard, stationed in a tower not far distant, had not only heard, but had seen them, and now came running to prevent their escape.

Israel Isett's musket was empty, and he powerless. Nevertheless, he threw it to

his shoulder, as if he would shoot the guard.

The only effect was to draw the fire of the Greaser, which, fortunately, flew wild.

Then Al, who had almost reached the top, saw the guard's knife flash, and tumbled headlong to the ground. The rope in which he had trusted had been severed at a stroke!

They could not escape by that way, so all turned down along the wall, running as they had never run before.

But the camp was now thoroughly aroused, and, though they reached the other angle, they could not there mount, and were then surrounded and forced to surrender.

CHAPTER VI.

AFTER AN EARTHQUAKE.

Worn out, humiliated and depressed, they were dragged back to the jail.

Bazoo Smith was utterly disconsolate and filled with a terrible fear. It was he who had bribed the soldier and sent for the aguardiente.

A great rage filled the hearts of the soldiers when they discovered the guard asleep at his post.

When they could not arouse him by calls, other keys were produced and the gate opened.

It was quickly evident that he had been drugged, and it was not long until the discovery was also made that the prisoners still in the jail had been served likewise.

As for the soldier whose weakness for strong drink had caused him to fall a victim to the tramp's tempting offer, he was probably somewhere sleeping off the effects of his potion.

Though the trio were threatened with instant death if they did not confess the means by which they had secured the liquor, they refused to make any confession.

More than an hour passed before the guard could be made sensible of his situation; then he was ignominiously cast into an adjoining cell and told that, for his defection, he would be promptly shot in the morning, with the trio whose attempted escape had produced so much excitement.

The prisoners in the other cell were also brought out of their somnolent condition, and they, with the guard, implicated the soldier, who, however, when search was instituted for him, could not be found.

In the midst of it all, another assault was made by the enemy, accompanied by a lively musketry fire, so that, altogether, the people of Carretas had little time for sleep.

Thus the night passed, and the day dawned redly, bringing with it a seeming increase of excitement.

A wild mob gathered in front of the jail for the purpose of witnessing the anticipated executions.

Our friends looked out on this mob with blanching faces. Nowhere was there a ray of hope.

The juggler had entirely lost his air of half-humorous bluster and bravado. He was as pale as a ghost, and his limbs shook under him so that he could hardly stand as he clung to the bars and looked out through the high window at this array of foes.

"Pardners, I reckon I never was so near the end of my rope as I am at this blessed minute. If I could get them rascals to listen to me, mebbe I could do some kind of show trick that would give us a few minutes."

He called aloud, but they did not hear him or did not choose to understand.

Aztec Al and his father were probably quite as much shaken, though they managed better to conceal the fact.

The crowd was seen to give way, and a

he clung to the bars and looked out through the gate, followed by a file of armed soldiers. A guard advanced and unlocked the door of their cell.

The hour of execution had come.

The condemned guard dropped to his knees and began to pray aloud in piteous tones.

As if in answer to this prayer, the walls and the building reeled, the earth billowed like the sea, and many of the adobe huts toppled into the streets.

A panic instantly ensued, and when the ground jarred again and the heavy mud wall of the prison gaped open, the soldiers became a demoralized mob and fled in terror.

An earthquake was shaking Carretas, boxing it to and fro as if angry at the outrages the town had witnessed.

Though almost as much demoralized as the soldiers and the citizens, the trio of condemned prisoners were the first to regain their heads.

The guard, too, who had been praying so appealingly, leaped to his feet and stared about.

"God be praised, senors, we're saved!"

He crossed himself devoutly as he looked at the fleeing soldiers and at the still trembling houses. His face was blanched, but the light of hope shone in his eyes.

"It is the mercy of God, senors, and if you are but willing to follow me, and to fight, if need be, I can lead you out of this place."

"We'll follow you anywhere, just so you take us out of this accursed town," said Isett, who was also inclined to look on the earthquake as something divinely ordered to save their lives.

The guard had fled without relocking the door of their cell, and the way to liberty seemed open.

They rushed out now, and passed without hindrance from the jail.

The soldiers and the people were huddling here and there in scared groups, afraid to remain in the houses, and equally afraid to stand in the narrow streets.

A more propitious time could not have been had, and the guard quickly conducted them to the nearest wall.

At this point two adobe houses had been thrown down. From behind one of them he drew a rude ladder, which he reared against the wall, and up which he scrambled with trembling haste.

He was followed instantly by our friends.

It was now broad day, though the sun was obscured by a strange haze that kept one from seeing a dozen yards in any direction.

They tumbled from the wall, and then were suddenly made aware of the fact that a body of the besieging soldiery, unterrified by the earthquake, and thinking them escaping inmates of the town, was running in that direction with the intention of making them prisoners.

"This way," shouted the guide, setting off over the rough ground at a breakneck speed.

Aztec Al had fallen behind. His foot slipped on a boulder, and he was precipitated so heavily that he was unable immediately to rise.

He had dropped into a hollow, and when he lifted his head with the intention of scrambling out of the place, he saw the soldiers very near.

They ran on, however, without seeing him.

But the delay was most unfortunate. When he got up and looked for his father and the others they were not to be seen, and when he followed, hoping to come up with them soon, he found he had lost them.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE GRASP OF THE RIO PERDIDAS.

Israel Isett and Bazoo Smith ran on at their best speed, without once looking back, naturally supposing that Al was at their heels.

They succeeded in eluding the soldiers, aided by the friendly haze and the rough character of the ground, and then stopped to take stock of their surroundings.

To their amazement they found themselves alone together. Aztec Al and the guard were gone.

Isett was much distressed and insisted on returning to look for his son.

"It's almost like flying in the face of Providence to run a risk like that," the tramp objected. "But it's about the only kind of runnin' we kin do. As fer me, I never was so tuckered."

He sank down, panting, and mopped his livid face with the ragged sleeve of his coat.

"If you're determined to go back, I'll wait fer you hyar."

Isett turned back instantly, fearing his son had fallen into the hands of the soldiers.

He heard the soldiers talking, and crouched near them, but their words told him that Al was not in their midst.

In spite of the peril, he continued on back to the wall.

As he crept carefully along over the uneven surface, he called softly, now and then.

His heart leaped when one of his calls was answered.

He moved in that direction, and came near falling into a trap. Some soldiers were out, calling as he had been—searching, as it seemed, for one of their number whom the earthquake had stampeded.

Isett shifted his position, with considerable celerity, and, in doing so, he tumbled into a rocky cleft.

The fall brought a smothered cry, and he realized he had fallen astride of a man who was hiding in the cleft. It was the identical soldier stampeded by the earthquake.

The man was so terror-stricken that he simply groveled against the rock, and whined like a fear-stricken animal.

As may be imagined, Isett was considerably startled and tumbled off the fellow's back in great haste.

No sooner had he done so than the man leaped out of the hole and ran across the slopes like a wild creature.

Altogether, it was a most fortunate thing for Isett. The searching soldiers heard the man's cry and saw him rushing away; and they passed by the cleft and ran on after him.

Isett heard them talking as they passed his hiding place. Their words showed bewilderment. They did not understand the character and cause of the cry they had heard, and were wondering if the man had encountered a wild animal or serpent.

Scarcely had they gone a dozen steps when a few of them turned back for the purpose of investigating.

This action brought such an increase of peril to Isett that he fairly shivered. Seeking about for some place of concealment, he discovered a ledge, under which he crept.

Then he heard the soldiers talking above him; and was startled when one of them struck a match and cast it into the cavity.

It fell near him, but did not reveal his presence. However, it seemed to satisfy them that no animal or other dangerous creature occupied the place, and they went back, still talking.

Scarcely were they gone when Isett crept out, all atremble, and beat a precipitate retreat. Convinced that he could not

find his son, he could only hope to meet him at the rendezvous agreed on.

Rejoining the tramp, who was by this time well rested, the two continued on, heading toward the lower slopes, in the direction of the river—the Rio Perdidas, the same in which Aztec Al had plunged with his bicycle.

No more earthquake shocks came, and the day brightened as they reached the trail that wound dizzily above the river at the point nearest the town of Carretas.

It was a very remarkable river, this Rio Perdidas—a veritable Lost River. Gathering a considerable body of water from the mountain plateaus, it rushed along here in bewildering zigzags, and then roared into a funnel of rock, where it disappeared, to be seen no more.

Scarcely had Isett and Smith reached the trail when they became aware that pursuers were hanging on their track. They had not shaken off the soldiers, as they had fancied.

It was an unpleasant discovery, for there was no deviating here from the trail, and the increasing light naturally added to the difficulties of escape.

But they hurried up the trail, hoping to reach the rugged country beyond, where there were abundant places in which they might successfully hide.

They went on in this manner for more than a half-mile, closely pursued; and were at the narrowest and most dangerous point, when a mounted Mexican appeared in front of them.

Another and another came into view, all armed.

From their higher position on the trail the mounted men could look down on the bewildered fugitives, and could likewise see the pursuing soldiers.

For Isett and the tramp it was a perilous situation. There seemed absolutely no escape.

Seeing the horsemen lift their rifles to fire, they turned back, bewilderedly, and ran toward the foot soldiers, looking in vain for a place by which they might ascend or descend.

More than fifty feet beneath them roared the swift river, churned into a yeasty foam, not so much by cruel rocks as by the vortex which here sucked it on; for not fifty yards below was the great funnel in which it disappeared.

Coming in sight of the soldiers below, these began to yell, which so completely demoralized and bewildered the tramp that he quite lost his head.

"Back! back!" he cried, turning again toward the higher elevation, as if that could avail anything.

He spun around quickly, and, in doing so, lost his footing.

A wild cry came from him as he felt himself falling into the awful depths, and to save himself he clutched frantically at Isett.

It did not serve to stay his fall, but only dragged Isett from the ledge, and they went tumbling toward the river.

The cries of the soldiers stilled as they witnessed the terrible sight.

Together the men fell, with sickening swiftness. Then they struck the water and were immediately whirled out of sight.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE POWER OF MERCILESS ENEMIES.

Aztec Al, separated from his father and the tramp, hurried on in the direction he supposed they had taken, keeping a careful watch to prevent falling into the hands of enemies.

Though his general course was in the direction pursued by those he sought, and in the direction of the agreed place of meeting, he deviated considerably from

their line of flight, and soon found himself in a broken and rugged region that promised to give him much trouble.

But he resolutely pressed on, putting the town farther and farther behind him.

As he was running thus across the ragged ridges, he pitched heavily and fell over a low cliff.

He was saved from serious hurt by landing on a huge pile of brush, that broke the force of his fall.

He had tumbled into a peculiar place, as he quickly saw—nothing less than the nest of an eagle.

The nest itself was not so large, but a mass of brushwood, which had accumulated year after year, covered the ledge.

Al came down in the center of the nest, in which were two young birds. He killed one of the young eagles in the fall, and scared away the old ones, that were sitting on the brushwood near.

However, they were back before he had quite got his head, and understood his peculiar situation, and they came at him, flapping their wings and screaming with a viciousness that attested their rage.

Aztec Al drew himself up, and, twisting a club out of the brittle, brushy pile, struck at the nearest bird.

He missed his stroke, the stick broke in his hands, and he came near pitching into the canyon.

His pugilistic attitude beat them off for a few moments, and gave him time to look about.

The ledge ran down the mountain side, overhanging a canyon, and the view he had of it convinced him he could descend it in safety if the enraged eagles were not there to interfere.

They were back again, flapping and screaming, and striking at him with beak and talon. He twisted another stick out of the nest, and struck at them as before, hitting one a vicious clip on the wing.

Then the fight grew desperate. Their courage and anger increased as they began to feel he could not injure them. Again and again they came at him, almost hurling him from the ledge.

Finding that the sticks were not of sufficient size to be effective weapons, he burrowed deeper and brought up a boulder.

Steadying himself, as they again dashed down, he hurled the stone, with true aim, at the female, which was the largest bird and the fiercest fighter.

It struck her fairly on the left wing, and knocked her, fluttering, into the canyon, and her mate, startled by this unexpected disaster, flew, screaming, away.

Given time in which to breathe, Al found himself in a panting and exhausted state, and so trembling he could hardly stand.

He sought another boulder, fearing the return of the male; then sank down in the nest, too tired to remain longer on his feet.

Hardly had he done so when he heard voices on the ledge below.

Two men were ascending toward the point he occupied, drawn by the noise of the conflict just ended.

Al recoiled with fear as he saw them. He knew them well. Both were bitter enemies of himself and his father.

One of them, Gabe Bunton, had, while in drink, at Isett's mine, brutally attacked Al, not a month before, and had been drubbed and discharged by Isett for the offense.

The other, who was known as Thistle Jim, and who was, if possible, a greater villain than Bunton, had been caught stealing articles from the mine office, and had been jailed for two years, Isett being the principal witness against him.

The youth could not have encountered

The Tramp's Trump-Trick.

enemies who were likely to treat him with greater cruelty.

"Ho, ho!" cried Bunton. "If it hain't the turtle dove, himself, a-settin' there in the eagle's nest. Well, that do beat my time."

"Good-morning, sonny!" cried the other, doffing his hat with a bow of mock respect. "The top of the morning to ye. The world don't need any sunshine when you're around!"

These men were not only cruel and vindictive, but were highwaymen of the worst stripe.

Acknowledging Juan Romero as their leader, they herded with the lowest class of Mexican thieves and thugs, and counted nothing too villainous that would serve to put money into their pockets or gratify their revenge.

Little wonder, then, that Al shivered with fear when he saw them, and found himself unable to reply to their noisy greetings.

"If we'd 'a' hunted the world over, Gabey, we couldn't have stumbled on anything that would have pleased us better. Eh?"

Gabe Bunton made no answer, but planted himself before Al with arms akimbo.

The male eagle came screaming back, but contented itself with noisily circling beyond the reach of harm. Gabe Bunton gave it no heed.

"I reckon you're not glad to see us any more than your dad was glad to see us on the trail a while ago."

"Then you know where he is?"

"Oh, yes; we know where he is! Don't we, Gabey?" the other cried, coming forward and making the sticks crackle under his heavy tread. "And we'll send the boy to meet his father, won't we, Gabey?"

The words were so ominous that Al started up, lifting the boulder.

Gabe Bunton, however, was too quick. Stepping hastily forward, he thrust the cocked revolver into Aztec Al's face and hissed:

"Go slow, sonny, or I'll put a bullet into ye. We don't intend fer to risk any monkey business. You're our prisoner, and you'll do as we tell ye. See?"

Resistance was utterly useless, but Aztec Al was so wrought up by fear and fury that he hurled the stone straight at Bunton's head, regardless of the consequences.

Bunton ducked and avoided the blow, and at the same instant his revolver cracked. The ball plowed through Al's hat.

Then Gabe was on him, and he was fighting furiously, while the other rascal was rushing to Bunton's assistance.

Bunton struck him a heavy blow on the head, thus reducing him to subjection, and with the assistance of his comrade tied his hands behind his back.

"You asked what we knowed about your dad, and I calc'late you'll wish you hadn't asked when I tell ye. We met him on that mountain trail over there, a while ago—him and that tramp that he's pardin' it with—and they was so skeered at the very looks of us, that they jist throwed up their hands and went tumblin' into the river!"

Al paled in a way to bring a grin to the scoundrels' faces. He saw there was some truth in the statement.

"It's a lie," he spluttered, nevertheless.

Gabe jerked him angrily to his feet.

"And you're a-goin' the same road! You'll find it ain't no lie, es fur es you're concerned. Your dad took a ride into Lost River hole, and you'll do the same."

He almost lifted Al to his feet, and pushed him on in front down the ledge, clutching him by the shoulder and holding the revolver in readiness.

The roar of the river came up distinctly when they had proceeded halfway down the slope.

They descended to the stream, at its nearest point, which, as it chanced, was about a fourth of a mile above the terrible vortex.

Here was a pile of drift, with some sawed logs that had evidently been cut for a cabin, and had floated down to that point.

Bunton removed from about his waist a large riata, which his sash had partially hidden.

"Into that hole you go!" he cried, with a terrible oath. "You thought we was foolin', but we wasn't. Your dad went down there, and you're to follow him! I'd feel like cuttin' your throat before settin' you adrift, on'y that would spile the pleasure of the thing."

"You and your dad didn't calc'late that Gabe Bunton would ever have ye by the heels when you was lordin' it over him up there at the mines. But every dog has his day, sonny. That was your day, an' this is our'n."

He had worked himself into a fit of vindictive fury. His eyes snapped and his teeth gleamed like the cruel fangs of an animal.

Aztec Al saw there was no hope, and he struggled wildly to remove the cords from his wrists, but the only result was to add to the pleasure of the fiends, who looked on and laughed at his frantic efforts.

Bunton pushed two of the logs into the water and lashed them together with the riata, in the shape of a V; and then he and the other villain seized Aztec Al, tore a piece from the lining of his jacket and bound it over his mouth; and then, by main strength pushed him into the water and tied him between the logs.

"Good-by," shouted Gabe, as he thrust the novel craft away from the shore and set it afloat. "The pit, down there, is a-roarin' fer you to come on!"

CHAPTER IX.

WITHIN THE JAWS OF DEATH.

Aztec Al's terror grew as he felt himself adrift on the terrible Rio Perdidas. About him were the rushing waters, on each side rose the mountain walls, and below was the deadly vortex, into which the stream poured with a sound like thunder.

A situation more terrible cannot be conceived, for there was absolutely no chance of escape. No human being was near, except the two callous scoundrels, who roared with laughter as they saw him floating away, as if they thought the thing an exquisite joke.

The odd craft moved out into the center of the stream, as if impelled by invisible hands, and there, catching the force of the current, it raced ahead with constantly increasing impetus.

Once it swung near the opposite shore, struck and rebounded from a rocky projection, and then began to whirl slowly round and round.

A very frenzy seized him as he drew near the opening into which the stream rushed and disappeared. It seemed a black tunnel, almost filled by the swirling current.

He had no doubt he was going to his death. It was said the Rio Perdidas never reappeared after making that terrible plunge. The story that it was sucked into a big lake, far down in the bowels of the earth oppressed him awfully.

Faster and faster he descended. Then he was in the midst of the spume, tossed like a cork.

He tried to cry out in his anguish, but the bandage choked back the sound.

It did another thing, too. It kept the

water out of his mouth, and was thus signal service.

He was surprised to find that he was not instantly drowned, and, as he swept on and on, this surprise grew. His craft rode more steadily. The current tossed less, and his face was freed from the flying spray.

The darkness was intense. He had a feeling that there were walls on each side, and that he was floating on a stream that was becoming more placid each minute.

However, his fears decreased very little. He felt that death must be just before him, and that this slowing of the current could avail nothing. Whoever went into the pit of the Rio Perdidas could not hope to return!

Nevertheless, he grew calmer as the moments went by, bringing him no injury.

Soon he could not doubt he had passed over at least a half-mile since entering the vortex. He began curiously to wonder how it would all end.

Then, far down, he caught the gleam of a light.

The thing was so strange he was at first not able to credit his senses.

As he was whirled about, it disappeared, but when he again faced down the stream he was much nearer the star-like object, and could not doubt he saw aright.

Then he made the happy discovery that the dashing waves had partially washed the unpleasant bandage from his mouth. It had dropped down a little, with only its upper edge across his lips.

He so exulted in the knowledge, which, with that other wonderful discovery, was of so hopeful a character, that he shouted and screamed in very delirium.

The echoes told him there were rocky walls on each side, that did not crowd close up to the stream.

The light grew brighter and brighter, and quickly he perceived it must emanate from a camp-fire. It was too large for a lantern or ordinary torch.

Al called again and again as he swept toward it.

At first he saw nothing but the fire, though it suggested the presence of human beings. Then he beheld rocky walls back of it, and, joy of joys! he saw something dart between himself and the light that bore a strong resemblance to a man.

For a full instant a bend blotted all this from sight, to reveal it more clearly the next.

The camp-fire glowed plainly, the rocks were clearly revealed, and two men, hearing his outcries, came running toward him along the banks of the underground river.

The two men were Israel Isett and Bazoc Smith; and Al, when he recognized them, though he was so bewildered he could not think clearly, yelled with insane delight.

"This way!" he screeched. "This way! Oh joy! Oh joy! Here I am! It's me—Al! Al Isett! Aztec Al! Hurry up! Hurry up!"

They came running along the rocky shore, drawn by his words, and he, sweeping toward them all this time, it was not long till they were near together.

The light of the fire illuminated the scene, and Israel Isett leaped into the water and swam out to where his son floated.

Grasping one of the logs, he drew the rude raft to the shore, and there, aided by the tramp, Al was speedily released from his uncomfortable position.

"What does this mean?" they demanded.

"What does it all mean?" was his counter-question. "How does it come that you're alive?"

The place they were in seemed a huge cavern. As to its size, they could only

guess. They had not been in it long enough to make any exploration.

Falling into the stream from the ledge, they had been swept through the funnel.

Isett could swim like a fish, and had not only been able to save himself, but had saved the life of Bazoo Smith.

He had been hurled against the tramp, after the choking funnel had been passed. Bazoo was floating as senseless as a log. Isett had laid hold of him, and, touching the rocky bottom with his feet, had dragged him out of the stream, and had succeeded in restoring him to life.

Isett had quickly comprehended that they were in some part of a cave, and, assured they could not hope to get out by the way they came in, he and the tramp had gone carefully down the stream until they stumbled on a heap of driftwood.

The driftwood was dry. Luckily Isett chanced to have in his pocket a water-proof match-case, well filled, and he had lost no time in making a fire.

They had been drying themselves by this fire, had been peering into the mysterious gloom encompassing them, and had been discussing the seriousness of the situation for some time, when the cries of Aztec Al attracted their attention.

Now, releasing him from the logs, they assisted him to the fire, and there, in its cheering glow, they heard his story and related theirs.

Whatever the future might hold for them, they were still alive, and they took hope.

CHAPTER X.

THE TREASURE CAVE.

With an excited cry the tramp leaped to his feet, plucked a brand from the fire, and, taking a step forward, flashed its light against the rocks nearest.

He had been staring in that direction for several moments.

"Pards, if this ain't the clear yaller stuff, stickin' in this rock jist like raisins in a cake, then I'll eat my old hat!"

A more difficult feat than the one promised cannot well be imagined, for it was a very dilapidated and greasy hat.

His words brought Isett and Al to their feet, and all three stared at the rock, which was undoubtedly rich in free gold. The shining specks glittered so enticingly that the beholders were fairly thrown into a fever of excitement.

The tramp moved along the wall with the torch, but he found no other specks until he had gone a dozen yards. Here there seemed to be a rich seam, like the first.

All three went back to the fire, and discussed the situation and the outlook.

"If there's millions of gold in here, it won't make any difference to us if we can't find a way out," said Isett, looking anxiously at the black water that tumbled by.

"Let's make torches of this drift and go on down the river! Because the Mexicans have never heard that the stream has an outlet somewhere above ground is no sign that it hasn't!"

Al's suggestion was immediately acted on. A number of sticks were selected that promised to flame well, and others were drawn out of the fire. In the drift was found a broad board, and this board, covered with sand, served as a shovel on which the fire could be carried.

Thus prepared, the trio set off down the stream.

The big cavern seemed without limit. They had not gone far, however, when they came on indications of human occupancy that set their hearts aflutter. There were prints of naked feet in the sand, and the broken shaft of an arrow.

"Indians!" Isett announced, staring

about as if he expected to see them rush on him out of the gloom.

These signs of human occupancy increased, and, a short distance below, a rocky room was discovered, that held a small store of dried meat and some dried berries.

The tramp's rapture knew no bounds.

"I say, pard, this is jist all hunk! I reckon we kin make this chuck do two or three days on a pinch, though I feel hungry enough to eat it all at once, myself!"

Up to this time he had been fearful. The sight of the food was a stimulant that acted like magic.

"I've bummed it in thirty States, and I never lost heart so long as the farmers' wives cheerfully handed out the bread and meat. But whenever supplies ran low—"

Al was searching farther down stream, and now came back to say the river and shore continued on.

They decided not to eat any of the food, but to take it with them, as a store to be sparingly drawn on.

They had now burned out all the dry wood except what lay flaming on the sanded board.

"Shall we go further down stream or go back?"

"A little further!" Al urged, in reply to his father's question. "We can't get lost. All we'll have to do is to follow the stream back to the drift."

Isett was too cautious, though, to run unnecessary risks, and hurried Al back to get more torch-wood, saying that he and the tramp would explore a short distance during Al's absence.

Al scampered away, not well pleased with the arrangement, and he was less pleased on his return to find, as he supposed, that the light had been allowed to go out.

He pushed on through the rocky room and opened his lips to call aloud, when a hiss almost at his elbow startled and stopped him.

It came from his father, who had purposely extinguished the light.

"There's some one coming. Don't you hear?"

Standing quite still, Aztec Al heard voices that were startlingly near.

Then, out of a passage farther up the river, which they had passed without seeing, a light streamed, and, shortly afterward, two almost naked Indians came into view, holding above their heads torches of greasewood.

They instantly sighted the tracks made by the shoes of the whites in a stretch of sand near the river's edge, and grew much excited.

"That's bad!" whispered Isett. "But good may come out of evil. Maybe we can follow them and find a way out of here!"

The Indians, however, did not come farther than the little room, where, discovering that the meat and berries were gone, they grew more excited than ever, blew out their torches, and disappeared.

As our friends felt that it was impossible to go on without a light, the fresh supply of wood brought by Al was used, and they again hastened down stream.

Not a dozen yards farther on they came to a storeroom of altogether a different character.

Not only did the tramp grow fairly wild as he entered this, but the Issets equally lost their heads.

It was a treasure chamber such as they had never dreamed of seeing. All around the walls were little rocky niches, where were great bars of pure gold, and the corners of the room were littered with hundreds of pounds of silver bricks. There was so much gold that they paid no more

attention to the silver than if it had been cubes of granite.

In all his mining experiences Isett had never seen such a treasure chamber.

"My, I wish I had that stuff in New York! There must be a solid ton of it!"

The tramp drew in his breath with a whistle, and, picking up several of the heavy bars of gold, thrust them into his pockets.

"Do not load yourself down," Isett advised. "Surely we can find the place again!"

"You don't reckon them Indians will leave this stuff here for us to come back to it, do you? Not much!" and the tramp stuffed some more bars into his pockets.

The argument was so sound and the example so infectious that they could not forbear imitating his example.

Thus laden with bars of gold, they pressed on down the stream, their excitement whetted by their remarkable adventures.

On they hurried beside the stream, until they came to a wall that outthrust itself into the water, and felt a strong blast of air.

The blast came from an opening to the left, and, seeing they must leave the water because of the interposing barrier, they turned to the opening.

Al led the way with the torch, but he had not taken half a dozen steps when the blast struck him fairly, and with such force that the light was extinguished and the embers and wood scattered.

The extinction of the light was a lucky chance, apparently, for it was scarcely out when they discovered that Indians were on their trail. An arrow struck the rock near the tramp's head.

Listening, now, they heard soft patterning of feet, and the gurgle of water where an Indian seemed to be wading.

To relight the torch was out of the question, and, in spite of the danger, they hastened along the passage.

How long they wandered thus they could never afterward tell.

The sounds of pursuit were lost, and they seemed stumbling on through endless regions of night.

In his fright Aztec Al had neglected to pick up the wood tossed down by the blast, and they could not make another torch even when it appeared they might do so with safety.

"We're lost!" Isett declared, fetching up with a groan. "I've been watching, and I'm sure this passage has branched and turned a dozen times in the last half hour."

CHAPTER XI.

MADE CAPTIVES.

"What is that?" cried Aztec Al. "The river!"

They had turned an angle. Now they stood stock still and caught the roar of water just ahead of them.

Though in darkness and peril, their hearts leaped as if they had found freedom, and they ran forward.

Al, who was in the lead, floundered over a lot of driftwood.

"We're back in the treasure chamber!"

His hand had fallen on a stick whose shape he remembered.

Back in the treasure chamber they were, though it was a bewildering fact.

They were about to strike a match with the intention of igniting some of the drift, when a patterning of feet sounded all about them, and, with loud cries, they were assailed by a number of Indians.

Before they could comprehend what had occurred or think of resistance, they were hurled down and made prisoners.

A torch was speedily lighted and its light flashed over them.

There were more than a dozen Indians—

repulsive-looking fellows—very scantily attired, and with dark, almost black, faces.

The Indians were evidently much enraged, and flourished knives and clubs in a harrowing fashion.

"Looky here!" the tramp begged, as one of the knives cut dangerously near his cheek. "A little less of circus-actin' would suit me. We're your friends, we air; leastways, we want to be. We didn't come hyar of our own notion, and we'll go away tarnation quick ef you'll only p'int out the way."

He was much scared, but thought it best to put a bold face on the matter.

The Indian leader stared at Smith, not comprehending his outburst. But another Indian stepped forward, speaking poor Spanish.

Isett's countenance brightened.

"If you'll tell us now to get out of here, we'll go away. We came in by the river, without intending it. We thought we should be drowned, but found ourselves in this cave."

The Spanish-speaking Indian interpreted this, but little attention was paid to it, and they motioned on along a passage leading away from the cavern.

Then they heard a great outburst like the sound of many voices, and discovered a number of Indians ahead of them in the passage.

These gathered around and mingled with the escort, and, when the end of the passage was reached, which was ten minutes later, they found more than a hundred Indians grouped at the entrance.

As they emerged from the darkness of the cavern the bright sunlight smote them blindingly.

They were pushed further out, and saw below them a wide valley, rimmed in by towering mountains, whose walls rose sheer toward the heavens.

Through the midst of this valley flowed the Rio Perdidas. It burst out of the cave a short distance to the right, and disappeared again at the valley's further end. Perhaps it did not again rise to the surface, but from thence flowed on underground to the sea.

The whole was a mystifying revelation. It was plain that here was a valley unknown to the people of Carretas, and the Mexicans of the neighboring regions, perhaps wholly unknown to the remainder of the world.

Yet it was equally plain that these Indians knew of that outer world which knew not of them. Otherwise, there was no explaining the knowledge of Spanish which one of them enjoyed.

However, the trio were not given much time for speculation, as the Indians gathered about, with cries of anger and excitement, and conducted them toward the rude adobe town in the heart of the valley.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRAMP'S SLEIGHT-OF-HAND.

Suddenly the tramp coughed very loud and succeeded in drawing attention to himself.

It was apparent that many of the Indians had never before seen white men, and this was particularly true of the women and children, who were hurrying out of the town in considerable numbers.

Bazoo picked up a pebble with a quick scoop of the hand, held it on high and made many violent gestures.

The Indian escort stopped and stared. They would have crowded closer, but the tramp motioned them back.

Then he again coughed loudly, held up the pebble and thrust it into his mouth.

It was a very large pebble, and he writhed and choked, and pressed it down his throat by rubbing his neck, until it seemed to have passed into his stomach.

After this he drew open his mouth to show that it was empty; then reached down and pulled the pebble out of his ankle.

It was but a sleight-of-hand trick, but to these simple Indians it was a marvelous exhibition of magic. Their amazement was staring and unfeigned.

The tramp purpled with pleasure and hope.

"Gents and ladies, when you got hold of me you didn't know that I was the high-muck-a-muckest of the high-muck-a-mucks! If you'd like an exhibition of my power, why, I'm at your service."

"And I want you to understand, ladies and gents, that this is not mere legerdemain, but a power conferred on me by occult forces. My father was an East Indian mahatma, and my mother—"

They were gaping at him, not understanding a word.

"Stow your English!" cut in Isett. "What's the use of givin' 'em that kind of a song?"

Seeing Bazoo hesitate, Isett lifted his voice in Spanish, like a crier.

"This is the great medicine man of the American nation! The gods are with him. He can work wonders, perform miracles, heal the sick—"

The juggler was swallowing another pebble, which he pulled out of his ear.

Then he put a pebble in at one ear and drew it out of the other, and, leaning forward, drove a pebble into an Indian's head and drew it out of the Indian's mouth.

The captors fell back agape, and Bazoo, much encouraged, tackled some of his best tricks.

He combed a whole handful of pebbles and sand out of an Indian's hair, and then, to the astonishment of all and to the fright of many, he opened his mouth and began to spit fire.

Not even his friends had seen him twist off the top of one of the buttons and crowd a portion of the stuff that was in it into his mouth.

Following the fire, he reeled out a dozen yards of fine white ribbon, which, after it came out, he gravely passed to the nearest Indian for examination.

Isett watched him curiously, and continued to call out his wonder-working powers and to point dramatically to the present remarkable performance.

A number of runners were hurried away, and then, to the surprise of the whites, the Indians sat down in groups around their prisoners, as if in anticipation of a continuance of Smith's miracles.

To the credit of the tramp be it said he was equal to the occasion. He was familiar with a number of clever tricks, having been connected for a time with a traveling show, and whenever his ingenuity of powers failed, it was only necessary to repeat something already shown to keep the Indians in a maze of astonishment.

He was in the midst of one of his most elaborate and taking tricks when the measured thump of drums was heard, accompanied by shrill and queerly-cadenced chanting.

Looking across the valley, a procession was seen advancing, from which came the chanting and the drum-beats.

The Indians arose as the procession approached, and one of them, pushing forward, with the Spanish interpreter, cast on the shoulders of the tramp a gorgeous red robe.

Then a rude chair on a litter was brought up, and to the chair the tramp was lifted bodily.

The interpreter said very little, for he seemed to stand in much awe of this wonder-working white man, but what he said made it clear that the juggler had been invested with priestly insignia.

Bazoo's assumption of dignity held the essence of comicality. He winked broadly to his friends, who were still afoot, as the chair was lifted and borne on the shoulders of four stalwart Indians.

"Pardners, luck never goes back on me! Better to be born with a gold spoon in your mouth than with a promise of all the riches of the Indies! I'm in the swim!"

He seemed to be, certainly, for now, the crowd collecting around them, Bazoo was borne in state to the adobe town, in pomp, with much chanting and the thumping of drums.

In the largest and finest of the adobe houses he was installed, with priests to wait on him, and in a smaller house, which seemed a sort of anteroom to the larger one, were placed the Isets.

But, before the day was out, all realized that, no matter with what consideration they were treated, they were still prisoners.

The tramp demanded an explanation when the interpreter drew near, and the interpreter, questioned by Isett, went away to seek some one in authority.

He came back with a priest and a chief, who, prostrating themselves before Bazoo-Smith, implored him to shine on their poor lives, to protect them from their enemies, to give them rain, and to forgive them for this deprivation of liberty.

"For we are much afraid of the white men beyond the mountains," the priest declared. "We have treasures here, gold and silver, and pearls and diamonds, and the white men, if they knew it, would destroy our town and kill us. Oh, mighty one! Even in your dreams you might whisper the secret! Therefore, we must not let you go!"

Nor could they be shaken from this decision, though the tramp spat fire and threatened them all with destruction if he and his friends were longer held.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE JUGGLER INVOVES HIS POWER.

For two or three days they were closely confined and watched, after which there was a relaxation of the vigilance of the Indians.

The juggler found that he was expected to give daily an exhibition of his powers, to which was to be added a supplication for rain, as the valley was suffering from a prolonged drought.

He taxed his ingenuity for a novel form of rain incantation, and, though no rain came, the priests and the people seemed to be satisfied, doubtless believing that time was required to bring about the needed downpour.

Al and his father thoroughly explored the village, which they found to much resemble the mud or adobe villages of the Pueblos and other similar Indian tribes.

Near its center was a circular council-house, or estufa, sacredly guarded from intrusion.

From this council-house, early one morning, Aztec Al heard terrible screams issuing. The voice was that of a woman, who seemed to be in mortal fear or agony.

Al leaped up the ladder that led to the flat mud roof, and would have dived down into the structure through the well-like opening—the only entrance—had he not been seized and hurled back.

The Indians who drew him away were in a fury of rage, brandishing knives and clubs.

Other Indians came instantly out of the council-house, bringing the woman with them.

She was an old woman, and the whites soon knew that she was the daughter of one who had been a chief, and that she was to be burnt as a witch.

Seeing her screaming and writhing in

the grasp of two Indians, Al tore himself from those who held him, and, rushing to her, struck one of the Indians down with a mighty blow of his fist.

A more astonished group never existed, and Al began to regret the action as soon as it was done.

The Indians, enraged beyond measure, flew at him, and, but for the appearance of the tramp, he would have been torn limb from limb.

The juggler raced forward in his red robe, nodding, frowning and shouting. He loudly ordered the woman and the boy to be released, but of course he was not understood.

The men stared, however, and fell back, though they still held Aztec Al and the frightened woman.

"You won't go, eh?" Smith howled, advancing and shaking his fist. "Let him loose, I say! If you don't—"

Reaching forward to the nearest Indian, he pulled a big black beetle out of the fellow's nose, which he cast backward over his head, and then, reaching the leader, with a further stride, he combed out of the leader's hair a small handful of ants and bugs.

"Go! go!" he yelled.

He lifted his hands dramatically to the skies, as if he would call down Heaven's vengeance on them, and they, scared beyond all conception, scuttled away like rats, leaving Aztec Al and the woman free.

The woman threw herself at the juggler's feet, but he lifted her, with a pompous wave of the hand.

Then she put an arm around the neck of Aztec Al and began to cry.

At that instant the interpreter and another Indian, somewhat bolder, came forward, and Aztec Al learned that he was now this woman's son—that he was to take the place of a boy who was dead, and that her adobe hut was henceforth to be his home.

It was a queer sensation, this feeling that he had been adopted by an old Indian woman, and his feelings were even queerer as he accompanied her to the hut.

When they were alone together, she threw herself on his shoulder, and then, bringing up a necklace of pearls from some secret hiding place, she proudly strung it about his neck.

CHAPTER XIV.

FROM ONE DANGER INTO ANOTHER.

The days did not pass without bringing many plans of escape. To remain in that valley, the prisoners of those Indians, was not to be thought of. But how were they to get away?

Two parties formed among the Indians—one party favoring the whites and the other opposed to them and demanding their death.

The first party was led by those who believed in the miraculous powers of the juggler; the other by the adherents of certain priests, who were disbelieving, and jealous of the homage and consideration shown the white medicine-man.

Unfortunately the woman accused of witchcraft, who had been rescued from death by Al and Bazoo, had been snatched from priests opposed to the whites.

"I don't like the outlook," Israel Isett declared.

They were in the room assigned to Bazoo, and to this room Al had come, foolishly wearing the necklace of pearls.

"Though these Indians are Tahayumaris and are very superstitious and easily deceived, they still have men among them who have got sense enough to know that you've been playing a game, Bazoo. The priests, for the most part, must be sure of it, for they are in the habit of putting up

little miracle tricks themselves, to increase their power.

"What I heard one Indian say to another awhile ago makes me afraid that our days of grace are up. They are planning to kill that woman, and us, too! They'll murder us, likely, and then cause the woman to be burnt, if they can force into subjection the opposition!"

The information was very disquieting. That Isett's fears had a strong basis of fact was shown to Al almost as soon as darkness had fallen.

The old woman, who seemed to have conceived for him almost as much affection as if he were her son, seized him by the hand, put into his possession a bag of gold, and drew him hastily away from the hut.

At a corner she left him for a moment, and when she returned to conduct him on, she threw another string of pearls about his neck.

She could not say a word that he could understand, but her actions and evident anxiety, combined with what he had heard from his father, made him know that some peril threatened, of which she was informed.

Taking him to the house of the juggler, she pointed to the mountains and by signs urged him to fly from the place and from the valley.

Then she glided away and disappeared. "We'd better cut sticks, I'm thinkin'!" Bazoo avowed. "There's deviltry afoot. But how we're to git out o' this valley is what worries me!"

"There may be a pass! We haven't made a search, you know. We're judging only by what we've seen and heard."

Al's hopeful view was adopted as possible, and the only one that offered hope, and they began to discuss how they might carry out a hastily-formed plan, when a crawling sound drew their attention.

From within the room they could see out into the dusky street, while themselves unseen, and now they beheld three dark figures creeping slowly in their direction.

That these were assassins slipping up to murder them admitted of no doubt, for closer looking revealed the gleam of knives held in the teeth of these men.

The imperiled prisoners were absolutely weaponless, except for a club that Al had picked up on the way.

"Make a dash for it!" Al whispered, with his customary quickness. "If they corner us in here, we're gone. And, see! There's more of them!"

Behind the three armed Indians came four more, advancing in the same stealthy manner.

The crawling villains were now within three or four yards of the entrance.

To delay longer invited death.

With a rush the three prisoners dashed through the opening, Aztec Al leading the way.

Before the Indians knew that their presence was known, the whites were out of the room and beyond immediate danger.

Instantly the attitude of the Indians altered from that of stealthy, would-be murderers to open enemies and alarmists.

While their plan of assassination had miscarried, there was now placed in their grasp a most formidable weapon.

They had only to make known to the village that the prisoners were trying to escape to turn nearly all of the villagers against them.

That the fugitives could get away they did not believe. They knew the impassable character of the mountains. There was but one route out of the valley which unskilled men could track. That was a route known only to the leading priests and estufa worshipers.

Al swung his club and knocked down an

Indian who attempted to oppose him in a narrow street; and all three, running like the wind, fled out of the town and headed toward the mountains at the lower end of the valley.

Isett stopped an instant to pant out, when the town was cleared:

"We must stick together, this time! There may be a gap in the mountains where the river goes through, and we'll hunt for that, first. If that fails, we'll look for a pass!"

The town was being aroused. Cries rang out shrilly, shouts resounded, and signal fires began to flare.

The river served to guide their direction.

They ran straight down its left bank, plowing through the irrigated fields, and wading to their knees in the muddy ditches.

These people had needed rain only for the pasturage of their flocks and herds. The river furnished all the water required for crops.

The tramp stumbled blindly over a row of Irish potatoes.

"If we only had time to dig some of these we'd be all right. Do you know, fellers, we're startin' without a bite to eat?"

Bazoo always thought first of his stomach, and, in this instance, it was a very important consideration.

The noise in the direction of the village now told that pursuit had commenced.

A run of less than a mile brought our friends to the mountain wall, at the point where the river flowed out. But no gorge was found leading from the valley. The river again dived into a tunnel!

They stood surveying the place as well as they could in the darkness. The roar of the water almost deafened them.

"Shall we risk it again?" Isett queried. "Will it take us into another valley and another treasure chamber?"

Smith shook his head.

"Pardners, I've had enough of that kind of a plunge bath!"

Convinced that it was useless to look further here, they began to search along the high mountain wall that curved back toward the village.

The search only confirmed their previous belief that the wide valley was nothing more than the bottom of a big canyon, rimmed in by walls that were practically unscalable. Possibly the Indians, through long familiarity with the place, might be able to get in and out, but no hope was offered to any one else.

Their peril was so extreme, however, that they made the search very thorough.

Leaving the river, they continued on around the wall until they gained the upper end of the valley near the point where they had been brought out of the cavern.

"If we can't do anything else, we can go in there and hide and baffle them for a time."

This suggestion, made by Al, was not at all a pleasant one, and Isett and the tramp both declared that they would almost as soon fall into the hands of the Indians as to trust themselves again in those winding passages.

That there was gold in unlimited quantities back there in the darkness did not attract them in the least.

Finding a cleft in the rocky wall, they lay at its mouth listening for sounds of pursuit, and, as they thus listened, they began to debate the feasibility of swimming the stream and trying their luck on the opposite side.

CHAPTER XV.

A FIGHT ON THE LEDGE.

Juan Romero, the bandit and insurgent leader, stood in the rocky country, just beyond the walls of Carretas, quaking and listening.

"Keep as still as if you were dead!" Rviero hissed, drawing back his head. "These are the ones who got out of the Ind in town last night. Those pearls must have come from there. They will be sought soon."

He looked at his comrades, as if for instruction.

"Kill them!" Gabe Bunton grated.

"Ay, ay!" cried in Thistle Jim, his fingers working greedily.

Romero did not wait for much discussion. Time was precious. He had in his belt a knife which had remained there in spite of the adventures that had befallen him. He drew it, and slipped forward.

His comrades crept after him, all writhing forward as stealthily as snakes.

Aztec Al was the first reached. He was lying with his face turned from these enemies, and was sleeping like a top.

Romero crouched near him, and there he remained until Bunton had crept to the side of Isett and Thistle Jim to the side of the tramp.

They were adepts at tasks of this kind. With the celerity of pickpockets, they "went through" their intended victims; then each drew out a dirty handkerchief.

With the skill that comes of much practice these handkerchiefs were knotted and drawn tight about the wrists of the sleepers, who were, of course, instantly aroused.

The trio sat up, dazed by sleep and by the bonds they felt on their wrists.

Even when they beheld the malevolent faces of their captors they did not immediately comprehend their terrible situation.

But only a few moments were needed to make everything clear.

All three paled and drew back as if struck violent blows. They knew they could hope for nothing from these men.

Romero jerked Al's feet together and tied them, and hastened to the assistance of his pards, who were having much trouble in their attempts to serve the others in the same way.

The tramp made but little resistance, being so sorely frightened, but Israel Isett had leaped up, and would have darted away if he had not been caught and thrown.

Even then he fought like a madman, and was with difficulty subdued and bound.

"We could have killed you," panted Romero, "but we spared your lives because we wanted you to tell us about the town and the valley and the river. Who lives there?"

Gabe Bunton had removed the strings of pearls from the neck of Al, and was now, with Thistle Jim, examining them.

"I say, Thistle, if you and I was only out of hyar with these strings, we'd be heeled now, I tell you."

He glanced meaningfully at Romero, and Thistle Jim nodded.

It needed only the oportunity to make them murder Romero for the sake of this wealth.

"Is there a way out of here?" Romero was asking, his first question having been answered.

He did not get a reply.

A half hundred Indians rose all about them, seeming to emerge from the very earth.

As they got up the Indians began to utter shrill cries and to flourish weapons.

Romero and his pards looked around, with blanching cheeks, and then seeing that a way was partially opened in the direction of the river, they made a dash.

Gabe Bunton clung to the necklaces of pearls, unwilling that such wealth should slip through his fingers.

The yelling of the Indians increased, and those armed with bows and arrows began to fire at the fleeing men.

Thistle Jim hurled himself into the river and attempted to swim it, but was wounded, and sank from sight before he was half-way across.

Juan Romero turned down stream, fearing a similar fate, and was hotly pursued and hedged in a hundred yards below, where he stood at bay, like a stag ringed in by deer-hounds.

The fight that took place here was savage beyond description.

Romero knew that he was struggling for his life, and with the reeking knife in his hand, he fought the Indians that crowded against him, hurling them back, one at a time, until half a dozen lay dead or dying at his feet.

As for our friends, though they had been bound and made helpless by these men, they could not but admire and pity Romero when they saw him making such a gallant stand against overwhelming odds.

But it was all over in a little while.

Romero fell, covered with wounds; Thistle Jim was shot and drowned in mid-stream, and Gabe Bunton, pierced through and through by an arrow, lay stretched on the rocks, clasping in his stiffening fingers the strings of pearls.

CHAPTER XVII.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

The prisoners expected only instant death. The Indians were enraged beyond measure, and had shown that they little regarded the lives of enemies.

Having disposed of the strangers, they now gathered about Aztec Al and the others, and brandishing their weapons in a manner that was most threatening and alarming.

Isett spoke aloud, calling for the interpreter.

However, no interpreter came, but some one who seemed to be a chief, waved the threatening Indians back.

Then their bonds were cast off and they were placed on their feet.

About them an escort gathered and pushed them in the direction of the town.

This did not encourage them, however, as the attitude of the Indians was that of suppressed wrath, which would soon seek to wreak itself on their helpless heads.

Al looked about, seeking some way of escape, and grew almost hopeless. Scores of angry eyes glared at him, angry faces wrinkled and scowled, and murderous hands frenziedly shook weapons in his direction.

It was plain that their enemies were in complete control and that death was the only thing to be expected.

"I'm afraid it is all up with us," said Isett, in a low tone. "You can't think of any way out of this muddle, can you, Bazoo? None of your tricks wouldn't work now, I reckon."

The tramp was in a state of physical and mental collapse.

However, at Isett's suggestion, he called out, to draw further attention to himself, and sought to comb some object out of the hair of the nearest Indian.

But his tricks seemed to have lost their potency. His hand was dashed down, with a screech, and a knife was threateningly drawn as if with the intention of plunging it in his breast.

"We're lost!" he moaned, his knees seeming to sink under him. "That was a trick that never went back on me before."

The anger of the Indians increased, apparently, as they drew near to the village, which was in an uproar.

The inhabitants remaining behind—consisting chiefly of women and children—poured out, and, surrounding the party, vented their rage in such a babel of wild cries as Aztec Al had never dreamed could come from human throats.

Into the principal street went the prisoners and their escort.

Then Al beheld something that puzzled him, and at the same time gave him hope.

On the flat roof of the estufa was his Indian foster-mother.

She was looking toward him and making mysterious signs, but emitting no cries. She was fear-stricken and anguished, yet determined.

He understood her, fortunately; understood that she was risking for him the life he had saved, and that she wished him to climb into the estufa for shelter.

But, as he later knew, he did not understand all.

She waved a bow and arrow, when she saw that he observed her, and again pointed to the only opening into the estufa.

"Do you see that?" he asked, speaking to his father, in English. "That old woman wants us to come up there. Shall we try it? Can we do it?"

Isett was in a desperate mood.

"We'll try anything! We'll be killed, anyway, if we don't make a try. Don't look at her. Give me a minute to think."

Almost unconsciously they had slackened their pace, an act of which they were made aware by smart blows across their shoulders.

Al leaped under the blow given him, which, fortunately, set the Indians in a roar of delight, and thus served, in a measure to appease their wrath.

Isett was not wasting his time. Running his keen eyes over those nearest him he observed that most of them were armed with knives in belts at their waists.

He hurriedly communicated this discovery to Al and Bazoo and acquainted them with his plan.

"In two or three minutes more we will be close by that council-house. When we get near the ladder and I give a whistle, each one of you grab a knife."

"Then we'll all break for the ladder together and try to get up to the roof where the old woman is. She wants us to take refuge in the council-house, that's clear. I suppose it will only prolong things a while, but I'm not going to die without making an effort."

The Indians heard his words and again lashed him, and would have speared him, no doubt, if they had known what he was saying.

The details of the plan were hardly firmly fixed in their minds, when they found themselves near the foot of the clumsy ladder that led to the estufa's roof.

Isett's whistle arose in a startling blast, and, snatching a knife from the belt of the nearest Indian, he pushed the Indian violently back against his fellows, throwing them into confusion, and broke for the ladder.

Aztec Al and the tramp imitated his example, as well as they could, and followed close after.

Only a few bounds were needed, and then they were climbing up the ladder.

They were halfway up before the Indians had recovered from their astonishment and knew what the prisoners were trying to do.

Loud cries then resounded and there was a flight of arrows.

Fortunately none of the arrows inflicted wounds, and before the Indians recovered from their astonishment the three were on the estufa.

The old woman screamed like a fiend as they mounted, brandishing her bow, and now, as Al, who came last, tumbled off the ladder, she threw it backward from the roof, thereby crushing down two Indians who were essaying to mount it.

"Into the estufa!" she cried, in her native tongue, pointing to the round opening exactly in the center of the flat roof.

There was a ladder here also, down which they almost fell.

Again the arrows whizzed and sung and the Indians yelled.

She dashed after the white men, but threw up her hands at the instant of setting foot on the ladder.

Then she fell headlong into the estufa, the Indian death-cry on her lips.

Al lifted her up, but she was dead before he reached her.

She had been but an Indian woman, ignorant and poor, but she had been faithful unto death, and the tears came into his eyes as he thought of her great sacrifice.

Isett snatched up the bow and arrows that had dropped from her hand, and looked up at the opening. Utter darkness reigned in the estufa, with the exception of the light that came in through this hole.

"I don't know why she wanted us in here, unless it's the best place in town to make a fight! That must have been her idea. The rascals can't burn the thing, and we can hold them back a while."

All felt, though, that there could be but one end to such a conflict. They were surrounded by scores of savage foes and were without food or water.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A BONANZA STRIKE.

An Indian daringly showed his head in the opening.

Isett quickly fitted an arrow, the bow-string twanged, and the Indian sprang backward with a screech.

They could tell from the trampling of feet on the roof that a number of Indians had ascended the ladder.

Isett fitted another arrow and narrowly watched the opening.

Aztec Al and the tramp stood near him in silent expectation.

Suddenly a flaming ball flew through the opening, fell at their feet, and illuminated the estufa's interior. Its coming was unexpected and demoralizing.

A half dozen spears and as many arrows came through the hole, and the tramp fell back with a scared cry.

An arrow was sticking in his shoulder, and at first glance he seemed to be seriously hurt, but, when Al ran up to him and sought to draw the arrow out, he saw it had only gone through the coat, and had not touched the shoulder at all.

"A narrow squeak!" the tramp panted, dashing to the nearest wall.

Recognizing the danger from the burning ball, Isett kicked it back out of range of the arrows, and stamped it out. It seemed to be made of cloth or fiber, soaked in some fatty substance.

Scarcely was it extinguished, when another came through sputtering and flaring, followed by another shower of arrows and spears.

"Keep back, and they can't hit you!" Isett cried, looking from the flaming ball to the opening above.

He had another arrow in readiness, and was firmly resolved to kill the first Indian who attempted to descend.

In spite of the peril, Al made a dash and drew back the foot of the ladder, causing the ladder to fall within the enclosure.

At almost the same instant Smith uttered an exclamation of surprise, and the boy turned and saw what so excited the tramp. The walls of the estufa were queerly and richly ornamented and covered. There were rugs and blankets of various designs, feathered prayer-sticks, fetishes, rattles, drums, bows, arrows and lances, and dozens of other articles.

In addition—and this more than all else drew the attention of the two—there were many strings of pearls as fine as those given the American boy by the old woman,

and there were other strings of gems that looked to be diamonds, rubies and emeralds.

Isett had seized one of the long lances hurled into the estufa, and with its point had drawn away the ball of fire, which he now stamped out with his feet.

Dense darkness followed.

That gave them a minute's respite, which they sorely needed.

Outside they could hear the excited cries of the Indians, and overhead footsteps.

Another ball of fire quickly came through, landing close to Isett's feet, and by its light he saw the bows and arrows on the wall.

"Arm yourselves!" he commanded. "If we can't save our lives, we can send some of these rascals ahead of us!"

He was desperately determined. He had worked furiously, and in that close, hot hole, the sweat was streaming from every pore.

Add to this closeness the odor and the gas from the fire balls, and the place was little less than suffocating.

"Do all the damage you can! They'll smoke us out pretty soon, and then the jig's up!"

He fired again, as he spoke, and the itinerant and the boy also sent arrows in the same direction.

Al's arrow, like his father's, passed through the hole, but the other's went awry, and stuck quivering in the mud wall opposite.

A flight of arrows was the reply, and one of them went into the fleshy part of Aztec Al's arm.

He drew it out, with unblanching lip, and stanched the flow of blood as well as he could with a piece torn from the lining of his coat.

Again the arrows flew, and one passed through the crown of the juggler's hat, where it hung, with feathered end upward, like the famous ornament of Yankee Doodle.

The fire balls were fairly rained into the estufa, the idea of the Indians being, apparently, to smother and choke out these enemies, if they could not otherwise be overcome.

Isett was a host in himself. He was an expert with the bow, and so accurate in aim that seldom was a head or body shown at the hole but it got an arrow.

The result was that, though the fire balls continued to rain, and the lances and arrows to fly, they came into the estufa without direction.

The smoke was increasing, but, at the same time, the interior of the queer place was made fairly visible.

A shout broke from the lad's lips.

"A way out! A way out!"

The words electrified his companions.

He rushed to the north side of the estufa—they had been standing all the time at the south side—and pointed out a black aperture near the ground.

"The old woman wanted us to come in here to save us! She knew of this!"

"Not so fast!" warned Isett. "Better know what you've found first! Bazoo, watch the hole above!"

Al was down on his hands and knees exploring the opening.

It was in form a small tunnel, leading no one could say where.

Isett rolled one of the blazing balls near, took it on the end of a lance, and thrust it into the hole into which Al already had crawled.

He saw that the tunnel had been much used. Its floor was beaten like a roadway—a discovery that much excited him. He drew back and skewered two of the balls on a lance point. They were burning brightly and made a fine torch.

Al had scrambled back out of the hole

with the wonderful declaration that it seemed to have no end.

The Indians were now becoming bolder, and Isett again stationed himself to drive them back with the arrows, of which there was, fortunately, an abundance on the floor and on the walls.

"Load yourselves down with those jewels," he commanded, "while I hold the place! We'll try that tunnel. We can't be any worse off in there, and it may lead us out of this!"

The tramp and the boy both hastened to obey the order. From the walls they pulled the pearls that were looped on sinews, and the other precious stones that were held in cloth-like meshes, which kept them secure and at the same time revealed their beauty and value.

They found no food, however, which, just at that time, would have been more precious than gems.

They worked hurriedly, while Isett, with his arrows, kept back the Indians.

In addition to the gems, they armed themselves with bows and arrows.

When this was done, Al took up one of the prepared torches and Bazoo another.

"All ready!" the boy cried.

Then he crawled into the tunnel in advance of the tramp, leaving his father to bring up and protect the rear.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FLIGHT THROUGH THE TUNNEL.

As the little party plunged into the dark of the cramped tunnel, they felt as if they were going into a trap, but they hurried on, nevertheless, crawling, at first, their way lighted by the torches' flare.

A rod or so beyond the entrance the tunnel so expanded as to admit of their standing erect.

They had barely reached this point, when the sounds behind them told that the Indians were growing bold and suspicious, and that some of them were on the point of leaping into the council-house, if the leap had not already been made.

An arrow whizzed by the head of Isett.

"Out with the lights!" was his order, and he extinguished his torch.

Al did likewise, and then they stumbled on through the gloom.

Other arrows flew dangerously near, and the cries and calls of Indians told that the estufa had been invaded and that pursuit was commenced.

All, therefore, hurried on, sure that, whatever might be in front, death followed close behind.

Fortunately, there were bends in the underground passage, and, while they stumbled heavily against the walls at these points, the angles gave them security from the arrows that were being fired.

Once, when Al halted for an instant, he heard a light patter of feet.

Isett also stopped, and quickly drawing an arrow to the head, he sent it spinning. A yell succeeded, and he knew that the arrow had found a human target.

As they continued on and the tunnel showed no signs of a termination, they felt assured that the passage led to the outside world—that it was, in truth, the one passage by which the world lying beyond the valley could be reached.

On they hastened, until, at length, they were brought to a halt by the appearance of torches and men in front.

The torches, though some distance off, were coming toward them, and the impression was that, by some short cut, the village Indians had got in ahead and blocked the way.

"We'll charge 'em!" Isett ferociously gritted. "Just as well die right here as anywhere."

Hardly had he said the words, when

yells arose behind, showing that the pursuing reds had also caught sight of the wavering torches in a bend of the tunnel, and something in these yells likewise told that the Indians ahead knew nothing of the flight and pursuit.

Up to this time the Indians behind had exhibited no light, but now a torch was seen, and it was waved by them as if for a signal.

Fortunately, they were a considerable distance to the rear. The wounding of one of their number by the arrow had kept them from overboldness.

Our friends, not knowing what else to do, leaped ahead, with the intention of assaulting the Indians coming from that direction, but they had hardly run ten yards when they beheld a wide crack in one of the walls—there were many such—and the character of the yells behind still showing that the Indians in front were not posted as to what was occurring, they crept slyly into this crevice for concealment.

The savages in front were coming on rapidly, waving torches, and an escape, except by hiding, would have been out of the question.

The fugitives almost held their breath as these Indians drew near. The torches so lighted the tunnel that concealment seemed impossible.

There were nearly twenty of these redskins, laden with various articles brought from some point beyond the hidden valley.

Looking straight ahead, in the direction of their friends, who were coming up rapidly, they passed the concealed whites.

They were not ten paces beyond the crevice when Isett dropped out of the fissure, whispering to the others to do the same, and the flight was resumed.

The yells behind increased, and, five minutes later, they could tell that the two parties had met, that explanations had been made, and that the pursuit had been recommenced.

It was a desperate race, with everything, seemingly, in favor of the savages. But there was one thing which told in behalf of the pursued men, and that was the possession of the bow and arrows by Isett and his shown ability to use them with effect.

For more than an hour the race was kept up. But no other Indians appeared in front, and, at the end of that time, the almost exhausted trio emerged from that wonderful tunnel, on a hill-side.

Not a thing was in sight, indicating human occupancy. For leagues the undulating tableland stretched away toward the horizon.

Fortunately, there were many hiding places alongside this hillside, with canyons and defiles which offered shelter, and, by means of these, they gave the pursuing Indians the slip.

Sold in New York, the pearls, emeralds and rubies taken from the estufa brought immense prices, thus enriching the adventurers quite beyond their expectations.

Bazoo Smith abandoned the roving life of a juggler-tramp, rehearsing with pride his Mexican hair-breadth episodes and trump tricks.

Israel Isett never returned to work his mine in the neighborhood of Carretas, not deeming it worth the trouble and expense necessary to bring it to a paying basis.

Two years after the escape from the tunnel, Aztec Al, the young Monte Cristo, urged more by a spirit of adventure than anything else, tried to re-enter the Enchanted Valley, as he had named it, with a party of friends, but the effort was unsuccessful. When they endeavored to pass through the tunnel they found it completely blocked.

Whether this was the work of an earth-

quake, or of the Indians, who feared an invasion of treasure seekers, could not be determined, but sufficient time and energy were spent to demonstrate that the Enchanted Valley was absolutely impenetrable.

No one cared to risk the perils of the "pit" of the Rio Perdidas, and the Enchanted Valley, with its treasures and its queer people, is still hidden from the eyes of civilized men.

THE END.

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